

# THE INDIAN MIDDLE CLASS: AN EMPIRICAL EXPLORATION

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## Abstract

*The paper quantitatively investigates the Indian populace belonging to the middle of its income distribution. The concept of the middle class, its qualitative transformation over history, and existing quantifications of a middle class are analyzed to arrive at a suitable definition for a middle class. Allied aspects of the middle-income class were looked into at the household level by analyzing the nutritional, educational and occupational features. Using the 68th round of the National Sample Survey, the consumption expenditure of households was used to earmark households as middle-class households. The status of education, gender disparity, nature of occupation and rural-urban differences between households that are similar in income was studied. The Indian middle class was found to be a much larger and less representative class than presumed. It has sustained better progress in some aspects of development, and this group of households 'who shall never be poor and yet never rich' does hold some potential in India's growth story.*

*JEL Classification: D63, I32, O53, R20*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of a middle class requires no introduction. While considering a country's income distribution, it is mathematically self-evident that a class of citizens shall lie in its middle. The term middle class may refer to a group with shared values or views, but it is often intended to refer to those who fall within a particular range of incomes (Cashell, 2008). Much of our perception of a contemporary middle-class household stems from the conception of the American middle class—characterized as a four-member family with a working father and a home-making mother and school-going children, all living in a suburban villa. While this group has existed in the U.S. for decades now, they seldom represent what a middle class is in contemporary times.

This group's role in the economy is also of paramount importance. Birdsall et al. (2010) consider the middle class the backbone of market economies

and the phase of globalization, while Easterly (2001) finds nations with a larger middle class to grow faster. The fact that this is a class of individuals who are neither poor nor rich makes their role in the progress and development of an economic society enticing.

While the crude conception of a middle class begins with Marx, the idea of a not-rich-not-poor group goes back to Aristotle. He saw them as obedient members of society who would not oppose the law and would lead it to prosperity. But the middle class has been observed to be the flagbearers of social change over the years, with the most notable event being the French Revolution – a *bourgeois*-led revolution<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the middle class becomes the educated group of rational beings best fitted to pull a society to prosperity and progress.

Unlike the poor, the middle class is seldom defined<sup>2</sup>. The attributes, economic nature, and size of this group were never contemplated. The middle, especially in India, is generally overlooked and

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<sup>1</sup>Bourgeois in French means the middle class.

<sup>2</sup>Anyone living below USD 2.15/day at 2017 PPP is universally proposed as poor by the World Bank.

ignored (Bagga, 2020). And they are known for their self-identified deprivation<sup>3</sup>. The period from 2004–05 to 2011–12 in India has not only been remarkable in terms of expansion in new middle-class size, but this growth has also been geographically and socially inclusive (Krishnan & Hatekar, 2017).

Thus, this paper explores middle-class households, identifying them to begin with, and then explaining their attributes. The following section reviews the existing literature on the middle class, followed by an empirical study to estimate the middle class's size. After that, the objectives and methodology have been briefly described. The empirical exploration of the Indian middle-income class, their size, characteristics, achievements and aspirations, and the findings have been discussed before concluding and discussing the scope for further studies.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The set of existing literature in the domain of the middle class has been studied extensively in this section. Special efforts have been given to learning the historical evolution of the middle class by studying them through Aristotle's *mesoi*, the early-modern European *Bourgeois*, the Marxian Petty *Bourgeoisie* and the contemporary American middle class.

First, the theoretical diction in this matter, specifically the works by Aristotle and Marx and the conception of a *Bourgeois* and the American middle class, was explored. Then, the empirical studies on the middle class were studied, and a disunity among the experts in determining the defining characteristics of the middle class was observed.

### 2.1. NOTIONS ON THE MIDDLE-CLASS OVER THE YEARS

Aristotle (384 BC – 332 BC) was the first to acknowledge the existence of a middle-income class in society. His notion of social structure rises from Solon's classification of land ownership and affirms that '*virtue can be practised with moderate resources*'

(Rocher, 2021). He defines this 'moderately endowed' class as the *mesoi*<sup>4</sup> – the '*moderately well-to-do peasant, capable of fighting as a hoplite*' (Aristotle, 350 BCE, 1905). Calling this group as 'many' or 'people', he merely accredits the virtues of the middle class and fails to objectively propose their pecuniary characteristics. But, he doesn't fail to forge the *mesoi*'s role in society. He identifies theirs as a very high trait in the virtue of the citizen. Unlike the “over-handsome, over-strong, over-noble and over wealthy”, rich or the “over-poor, over-weak and utterly ignoble” poor, *mesoi* never indulge in violence and roguery. They are neither greedy nor envious and know how to govern and be governed as free citizens.

In short, Aristotle's *mesoi* are the most desirable members of the democratic city-states in Aristotelian times (Aristotle, 1905; Glassman, 1995). They respect the law. Unlike the debased poor or arrogant rich, they are the actual choice makers choosing the rulers. While some states can be democracies of the poor and others may be oligarchies of the rich, only a *meso polieata* shall thrive due to the distinct features of its ruling group<sup>5</sup>. Thus, for the political system to reach a long-term equilibrium, the *mesoi* shouldn't degenerate to join the poor or grow too powerful to ebb the rich (Rocher, 2022).

The middle class rose to their superstardom by the 17th–18th centuries, especially with the English Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the French Revolution of 1789 (Tripp, 1994; Clay, 2014). The now famous term '*Bourgeois*' came to refer to the middle class in this period<sup>6</sup>. Still, it generally denoted the newly risen class of educated individuals who were "*ambitious yet politically and socially frustrated*" (Clay, 2014).

John Locke was the first proponent of this class's social power in driving social order and turning the tide of history to their benefit. His ideas saw England going from a monarchy to totalitarianism to a parliamentary monarchy, steered by a revolution of the intellectually rich. These ideas also significantly contributed to the French revolutionary thinkers such as Rousseau, Marat and Montesquieu.

<sup>3</sup>Because they are desperate to be rich someday and hence, lament their inability to be flamboyant. The cliché statement “*Hum toh middle class hai*” (we are [the unfortunate] middle class) has also found a reference in popular culture.

<sup>4</sup>Meaning, 'people of the middle'

<sup>5</sup>*meso polieata*: a state ruled by the middle class.

<sup>6</sup>The term meant a town dweller of pre-revolutionary feudal France

Despite all the existing diction, no one has ever discussed class as profoundly as Marx. He was also one of the premiers to term the French Revolution a bourgeois revolution. However, the Marxian interpretation of a bourgeois, at least in his later writings, is different from the conventional notion seen above, in the sense that Marx identifies a *Bourgeoisie* as the class that owns the means of production in a capitalist society. Thus, the modern interpretation of the bourgeoisie differs from the 18th century interpretation of the same term (revolution, n.d.). Marx's bourgeoisie is undoubtedly the affluent class, and the group with the 'middle class-esque' character might be a part of the proletariat. Hence, for Marx, the middle becomes a *transitional class* comprising individuals who "*control money capital ... [and] lack the investment necessary for accumulating surplus value, but need not sell their physical labour to survive*" (Aslany, 2019).

Marx praises the middle class for having "*created enormous cities ... [and] rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life*" apart from having "*pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal*" and "*drown the heavenly ecstasies of religious*" (Marx & Engels, 1848). Like Aristotle, Marx also points to the dynamics of this non-resource-owning and non-labour supplying middle-class. Claiming that the lower-middle class's capital shall not fit modern industrial society's needs. At the same time, the richer bourgeois faction shall grow up to become a supplementary part of the bourgeoisie class.

Thus, Marx proposes that in a modern (and also capitalist) society, the middle class shall fluctuate into proletariat and bourgeoisie, ultimately ceasing to exist. Nevertheless, like many of Marx's predictions, the middle class has not 'died out' since modern capitalist tendencies work disproportionately across countries. While they have lost their edge in some nations, they are numerically and politically dominant in others (*Petite Bourgeoise*, n.d.).

Despite all the historical interpretations the middle class has been subjected to, the contemporary times' middle class can be seen as very different from all these conceptions. The concept of the middle class in the current set-up stems from the Post-Fordist

American society. A middle-class man is an embodiment of the self-fulfilling capacity of the American dream. The notion of a middle-class household is that of someone with an (inherent) capacity to climb up the social ladder and become wealthier and more successful.

The American way (of capitalism, democracy and mass production) proved to be befitting the middle-class aspiration as it could give them access to "*more choices, better quality, liberty and rights*" (Swain, 2020). They also exhibit a subject of passion, a realization that working fulfils the self, leading to personal development and growth without material outcome (Farrugia, 2019). Mills (1969) attributes the growth of the middle class to the expansion of white-collar occupation through the rise of big business and big government, the consequent trend of modern social structure and the steady growth of bureaucracy.

The middle class is also responsible for pushing the economy further through its walk, like the middle class (Bledstein, 2001)<sup>7</sup>. The qualities of a middle-class, bootstrap mentality - to rise from nothing into something - and ownership of property (as the first instance of attainment), as identified by *Elements of the American Dream* (n.d.), still define the middle class to a great extent.

Thus, the middle class has historically played a critical role in the economy by pulling the socio-political and economic systems forward through their ambitions, aspirations and effort. Even the conventional Indian belief considers the Indian Middle class to be at par with their American counterparts and expects it to play these roles. This conception shall be taken forward further in this paper and serve as our definition/conceptualization of the Indian middle class.

## 2.2. ONE MIDDLE CLASS - MANY DEFINITIONS

In any empirical study, the premises constructed play a critical role. For this, arriving at a precise definition for the middle class is crucial. However, a commonly agreed upon working definition has always been debated among the stalwarts in this domain. The identification of a class, especially the middle

<sup>7</sup>Middle-class walk- shop at the same stores, go to the same schools, enter the same professions, work out at the same clubs, patronize the same doctors, purchase the same commodities, and aspire to the same lifestyle.

class, can be taken as a heuristic device<sup>8</sup>. Unfortunately, numerous studies have found self-identification to be intransitive in the case of the middle class (Vaishnav et al., 2017; New York Times, 2005). Some studies have even attempted to demarcate the middle class through their consumption pattern. Krishna & Bajpai (2015) were the premiers defining a middle class by the ownership of assets such as cars, two-wheeler, air conditioners, and ceiling fans inter alia<sup>9</sup>. Aslany (2019) goes further in this regard and finds a multidimensional definition for the middle class. Households are weeded out based on their threshold income, education, social network, housing, etc., and then calling the households that remained in the middle class. Similarly, Nayab (2011), in his study of the middle class in Pakistan, utilized the method of Principal Component Analysis to condense multiple indicators of living quality to arrive at an index score and then identify those lying in the middle for further research.

Most studies have proceeded by identifying specific characteristics of the household, such as its income or consumption. And as mentioned earlier, middle-class welfare has always been outside the policy sphere; therefore, no official definition exists. Various experts have proposed various definitions for a middle class, with some defining the bounds based on the relative position of income while others are on absolute

income levels. The variety, and disunity, among the existing studies defining the American middle class, can be seen from the representation in fig. 2.2.1 below.

The most popular income-based definition has been given by Banerjee & Duflo (2008). They defined an Indian middle-class household with a daily per capita expenditure of USD 6 to USD 10 in Purchasing Power Parity terms. Unsurprisingly, they also find that the middle class consists of households engaging in fruit and vegetable vending, selling milk and collecting errands. The National Council of Applied Economic Research (2010), gives a mildly different interpretation of the middle class, calling them the households earning between INR 200,000 and INR 100,000 in 2001 prices. It translates approximately to USD 12 to USD 20 in 2001 PPP terms, meaning that the Indian middle class may be almost at par with their American counterparts in terms of economic power. Interestingly enough, these studies also imply that someone who will be middle class in a developing state would be poor as per the standards of the rich and developed world.

On the contrary, the latter set of definitions looks at households in terms of their relative position within their country. Thurow (1987), the premier in this regard, defines the U.S. middle class as those falling between 75% and 125% of the median income.

Figure 2.2.1: American Middle Class, as defined by 12 different studies



Source: Reeves et al., 2018.D

<sup>8</sup>The socioeconomic behaviour of households does not follow a single-shot formula. Therefore, classes cannot be seen descriptively- in terms of averages. But terming them based on wealth concentration, political aspirations or self-identification is also seen to be unidimensional. For further details see Sterns (1979).

<sup>9</sup>Items typically households who own consumables that a poor household shall never have

Similarly, Salverda & Jong (2017), classify the Dutch middle class as earning between 60 per cent and 200 per cent of the national median income. However, the definition by Pew Research Centre (2015) of any household that expends greater than two-thirds but less than twice the median consumption spending of all the country's households remains the most popular. Apart from varying bounds set by various definitions, none of the studies significantly depart in their rationale or approach. Nonetheless, the fact that different definitions lead to hugely different upper and lower bounds of income means that we shall also reach hugely different middle-class sizes (a fact clarified even by fig 2.2.1).

In the case of the multidimensional and self-reporting-based indicators, the studies arrived at bolstered results without many insights. The data required for these studies were highly granular and thus difficult to obtain. Hence such a methodology was ignored for our study. The definitions based on absolute income levels were also felt to be of little use in the context of India. As noted by Banerjee & Duflo (2008), the lower income bound for the middle class in many developing countries falls above the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile and even the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile! Hence, a constrained definition was also ruled out.

A careful study of deciles and quintiles allows for comparing distribution in different societies by estimating the shares of national wealth and income going to each group (Piketty, 2013; Ricci, 2020). Thus, our study takes the meaning of the middle class literally, considering households lying in the middle of the income distribution. The definition is based on relative income levels proposed by Pew Research Centre (2015).

### 3. OBJECTIVES

From the review of the existing literature, it is clear that the role the middle class plays in an economy is not negligible. From maintaining political stability

(Aristotelian Middle class) to directing historical evolution (Lockean middle class) to pull the economic engine forward (Easterly's middle class), this group plays a very significant social, political and economic role. The middle class, in this sense, becomes the group of households with stable jobs, good education and abstaining from violence. The near neglect of this group from the policy sphere, especially in a bustling economy like India, is problematic. It is also relevant to study the middle class' status in India since most studies have limited themselves to calculations of the headcount of the income middle class with little progress beyond that. The defining characteristics of the income middle class, their achievements in life and the dreams and aspirations that arise out of this all remain largely unknown. Hence, this paper shall attempt to decipher these aspects of India's Income middle class through an expository approach. The analysis attempts to answer the following questions:

- i. What income bracket sets the bound for the income middle class in India?
- ii. What are the defining attributes of this income group? Is there a disparity being observed within these households?
- iii. How do the findings concur with earlier analyses?

## 4. METHODOLOGY

### 4.1. DATA

This 68th Round National Sample Survey Household Consumption Expenditure data was used since it was the most recent and comprehensive data containing information at the household level<sup>10</sup>. The dataset contains the details about the location of residence, the industry of occupation, ownership of assets, type of dwelling, level of education, etc., of over 2,83,059 individuals from 1,01,662 households (NSS, 2011a). To segregate households based on income, we consider the Households' Monthly Per capita Consumption Expenditure for a Mixed Reference Period (MPCE-MRP)<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup>Expenditure in the country during the period from 2011-12. The dataset provides information on the households' expenditure on food, durables, health and education, among other things, along with insights into health, nutrition, education and fertility. This has been collected from a nationally representative, a cross-sectional panel of the Indian populace. NSSO has employed a multistage stratified random sampling of stratifying 7469 rural and 5268 urban areas in the 28 states and 7 Union Territories of India (as in 2012).

<sup>11</sup>MPCE reports the total of the monetary values (actual and imputed costs) of all items (except housing) consumed by the household on domestic account during the reference period (NSS, 2011b), and MRP refers to the fact that the MPCE measures consumption of five low-frequency items (clothing, footwear, durables, education and institutional health expenditure) over the previous year, and all other items over the previous 30 days (Gaur & Rao, 2020).

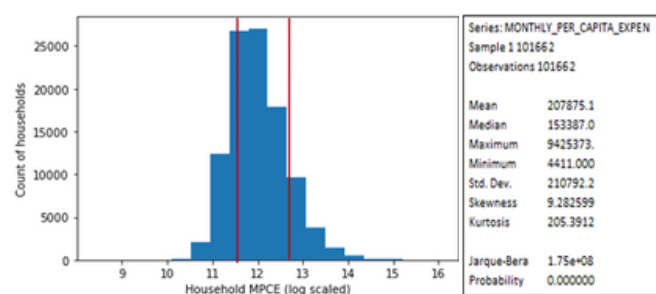
## 4.2. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

All calculations and plots were performed using Pandas and matplotlib.pyplot libraries on Python. Further, specific variables were chosen to define various characteristics of the households. We analyse the effect and interplay of various factors in the middle-class population to observe the economic, occupational and social features of middle-class households and the rural-urban differential. An attempt was also made to illuminate the households' nutrition, health and education achievements. Given that the paper's primary objective has been to provide a realistic picture, only descriptive statistical techniques are employed. Advanced statistical techniques have been deliberately overlooked.

## 5. FINDINGS

Figure 5.1 below has been derived from the data of Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure data, and the income distribution thus attained has a median value of INR 153,387. Accordingly, a middle-class household was found to have an MPCE between INR 102,258 and INR 306,774, implying that around 61.1% of India's households qualify as income middle-class households. The size of the middle class thus estimated is used for further analyses. It is critical to note that the income thresholds in terms of MPCE alone fail to give us significant insight as they comprise all households' monetary and non-monetary expenditures. Hence, the value of MPCE has not been used for drawing further insights.

**Figure 5.1:** Income distribution of Indian households and descriptive statistics



Source: Author's elaboration

**Figure 5.2:** State-wise distribution of Middle-Class size



Source: Author's elaboration

Figure 5.2 above shows an almost uniform distribution across the states in the distribution of middle-class populations. The Eastern states, expectedly, tend to have a lower number of middle-class households. On the other hand, the northeastern states have the most significant number of middle-class households. The belt of wealthy states, vis. Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana, and Punjab comparatively have lesser middle-class households. The state of Sikkim has the highest middle-class population at 83.20 per cent, while the state of Odisha has the lowest population of the middle class at 42.55 per cent. The proportion of the middle class in Indian states varies around a mean value of 62.01 per cent with a variance of 0.011.

With the insight into the number of households in India that can fall into the bracket of income middle class, we move on to find the household's characteristics and the rural-urban differential. In the urban areas, the middle class comprises 58.16 per cent of the total households. Around 69.34 per cent of them own their own houses and have an average of 4.4 members. Minorities such as Muslims are seen to have a greater propensity (at 63.12 per cent) to fall into the middle-income bracket. More importantly, most of the urban middle-class households (57.7 per cent) are non-salaried and are either self-employed (running petty shops, rickshaw driving or similar) or wage-earning (engaged in the informal sector). The households, on average, do not consume three full meals a day<sup>12</sup>.

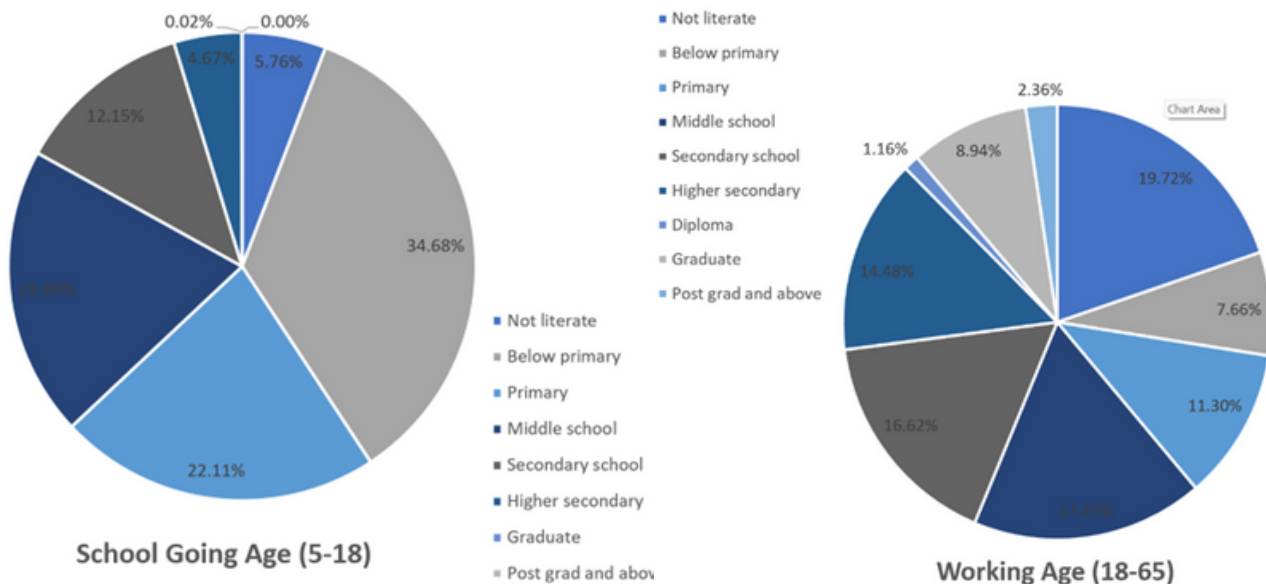
<sup>12</sup> Meals contain only those foods taken by an individual, comprising primarily of cereals but satiating the minimum required nutrition and excluding high tea, snacks and *nashta*.

On the other hand, rural households comprise around 63.17 per cent of the rural population. 94.61 per cent of them have property of their own, with an average of 4.6 members. Among rural minorities, Christians have a greater propensity (70.69 per cent) to be in middle-class households. Similar to findings in urban areas, rural households are also noted for being majorly non-salary earning, at 74.69 per cent. 55 per cent are agriculturalists (largescale farmers) or are self-employed in non-agricultural activities (such as shopkeeping, truck driving, etc.). Like their urban counterparts, the rural middle class also doesn't have three meals daily on average.

The middle class is also seen to be attaining more significant levels of education, thereby becoming to befit the French bourgeois. While the members of a

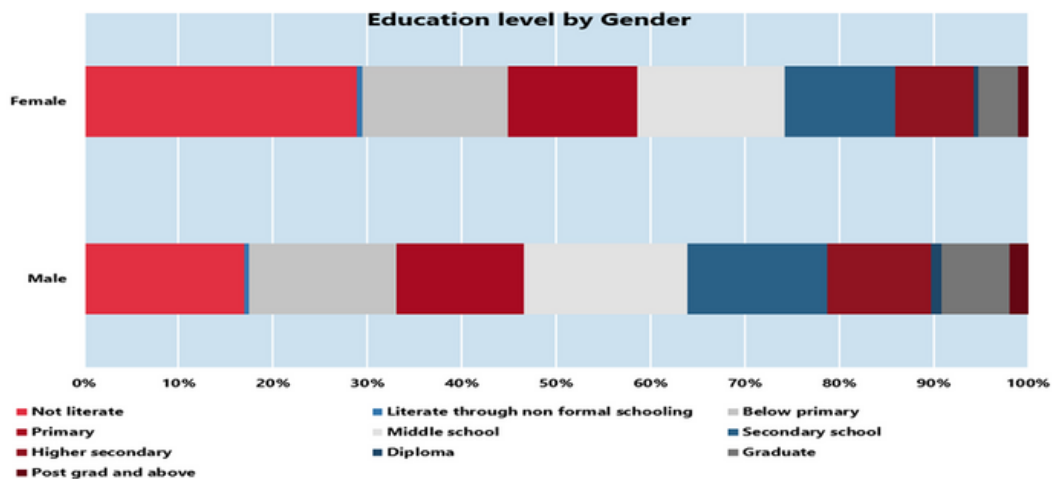
middle-class households of working age have not gained much education, the school-going aged children are noted to be attending schools. Most school-going age members are seen to have attended at least some schooling, with over 50 per cent of the children having attended more than primary schooling. It is a positive sign for the future of the middle class. The transformation of India into a knowledge economy can well be geared toward the middle class. Unsurprisingly, the educational attainment of the working age shows a bleak image. While about 20 per cent have never seen the school, only slightly more than 11 per cent have attained a college degree. Middle-class households are also noted to have a lesser level of gender inequality, especially regarding educational attainment and household participation.

Figure 5.3: Educational attainment of middle-class households



Source: Author's elaboration

Figure 5.4: Educational level by gender of middle-class members

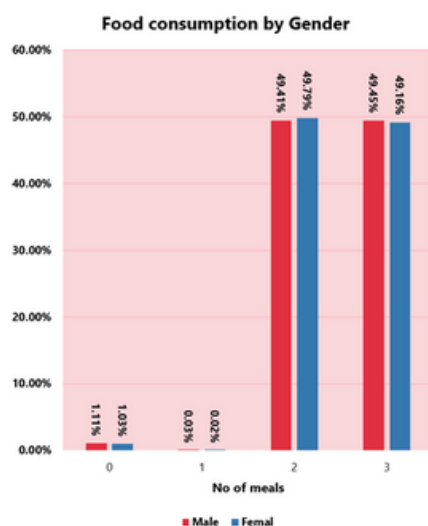


Source: Author's elaboration

While many females (28.89 per cent) are still noted to be illiterate against 16.91 per cent of men, almost equality is observed at levels of schooling with almost the same number of males (45.64 per cent) and females (41.05 per cent) attending primary, middle and secondary school. A strong skew in favour of males is then again noted in higher education levels, with the proportion of women (4.18 per cent) with an undergraduate degree falling to almost half the level of middle-class men (7.26 per cent) with an undergraduate degree. Given the U-shaped relation between education and Female Labour force Participation<sup>13</sup>, more females enter the job market upon education beyond schooling. The marginal attainment of school education of females shall go wasted, since, women with just a school education tend to be completely out of the job market.

An almost equality is also observed regarding the number of meals consumed by men and women. The number of women taking two meals a day exceeds that of men only by a meagre 0.38 percentage points. Similarly, the number of men taking three meals exceeds women only by 0.29 percentage points. While these findings are largely inconclusive, they do provide a shred of possible evidence for a comparatively better position for females in middle-class households.

Figure 5.5: Gender-wise consumption of meals



Source: Author's elaboration

## 6. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

From our analysis, it is clear that the Indian middle class is not precisely as perceived. Given the sheer amount of this group, we may conclude that the middle class has an untapped potential within itself<sup>14</sup>. Their almost uniform distribution across the states also tells us that the middle class ought to be a deciding factor in various affairs of each state. The levels of education attained by this group in totality are worth to be mentioned. Even uneducated and illiterate parents are seen to be sending their children to schools. The study also reveals that the Indian middle class is not composed of an overwhelming majority of skilled workforce but of labourers and non-skilled workers. The absence of factory-going men, like in the case of the American middle class, is visible here, with income opportunities being tapped in from other avenues. With the number of school-going children rising, it also becomes necessary from policymakers' end to ensure that these students go up to college and gain education to become skilled labour force.

The relative absence of gender segregation within middle-class households also throws a positive light on the efforts in this regard. With certain evidence of a better position for women in these households, we are safe to say that women will also end up securing better education. We may see greater participation of middle-class females in social life, contributing to a higher FLPR. Apart from income, the middle class is also seen as sufficiently wealthy to own property—mostly inherited (especially in rural areas). Hence, the role that bequeaths and inheritances play in the income security of these households needs to be explored further.

However, the nutrient intake and balance of the households remain a matter of concern. The case of not eating three meals a day cannot be seen lightly<sup>15</sup>. Even though clarity is required on the meal timings, the inability of the households to have three full

<sup>13</sup>See Desai (2016)

<sup>14</sup>It is admitted that the size is indeed impacted by the definition in use. As discussed earlier, we know that a modern middle class, ideally, have the attributes of the American middle class. Hence, I used the most ideal definition, from the American context, and used it for India. This could help us to see if the Indian middle class does show the ideal 'middle class' characteristics.

<sup>15</sup>While contemporary researchers cite the sufficiency of 2-3 meals a day, it is important to note that the timing and nutritional completeness of the meal, inter alia, have a significant impact on overall health. This makes three square meals spread through the day necessary for better metabolism. For details, one can refer; Paoli, A., Tinsley, G., Bianco, A., & Moro, T. (2019). The Influence of Meal Frequency and Timing on Health in Humans: The Role of Fasting. *Nutrients*, 11(4), 719. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu11040719>



meals despite earning sufficient income is counterintuitive. Unlike the poor, whose primary objective of nutrition is sustenance, a middle class's primary objective in nutrition must be that of having a nutrient-rich, balance diet. This also necessitates further foray into what the middle class is eating. Nonetheless, seeing that the middle class is just eating twice a day, can be directly linked to their nature of work. As seen above, most middle-class households are engaged in self-employed activities, so they seem to be skipping their afternoon meals to work a bit more and earn a few more dimes. This also suggests that an increase in income (which pushes the household into the middle class's bracket) still doesn't translate into freedom to have healthy meal. As this income is non-certain and agents find themselves better off, income wise, by skipping a meal.

## 7. LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

It is realized that the chosen definition of the Middle class had loosely impacted the perspectives of the paper. The paper endeavoured to throw more light into the day-to-day life of the 'not-poor-but-not-rich' group of households in the country that has found many mentions in daily conversations and pop culture. The perspectives covered in the paper were also chosen to give a comprehensive perspective on the entire income group. However, much scope lies in exploring each of the considered variables into separate works utilizing regression analyses to prove inter-causality. Additionally, the definition of the middle class needs to be expanded and developed beyond income-based measures into multidimensional definitions accounting for temporal analysis revealing the transformations this class has witnessed over the years of economic development in India.

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